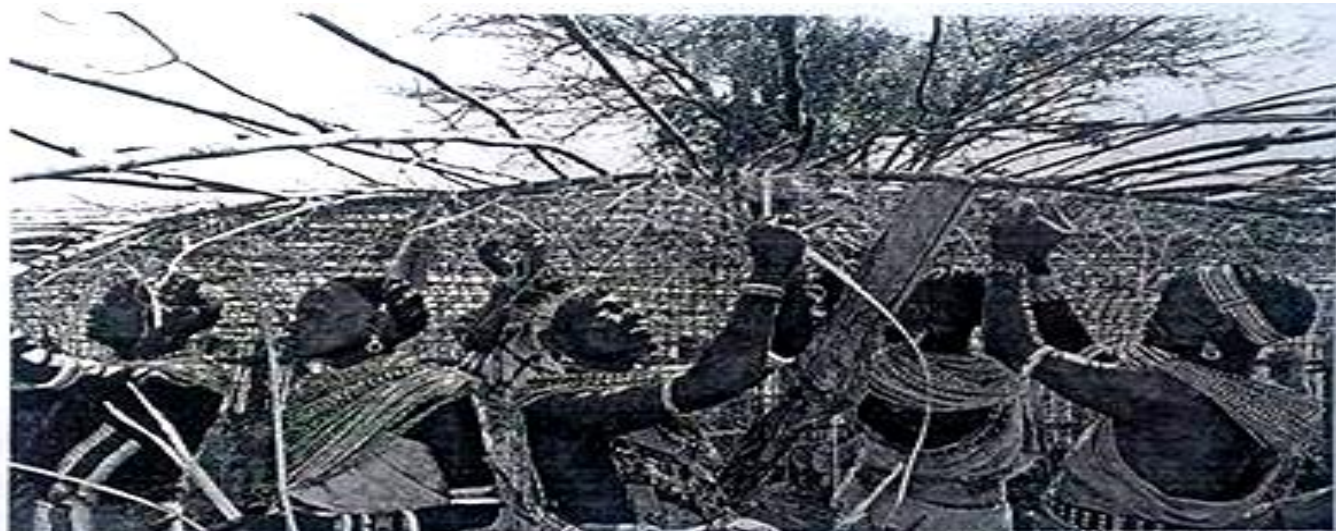


Umoja Journal

From Broken Lives, Kenyan Women Build Place of Unity



Photographs by Evgeny Sokolov for The New York Times

Residents of Umoja working on the roof for a new hut in their village, where about three dozen women live. Some of the women say their husbands forced them from their homes because they had been raped.

By MARC LACEY

UMOJA, Kenya — A village is a village in this remote part of northern Kenya, each one as nondescript as the next. Thorn branches are piled high in a giant circle to keep the wild animals out. The huts are set up one next to the other, each made from a mixture of mud and cow dung that has been dried in the sun to form a homemade plaster.

Still, one village around here, a place the people call Umoja, manages to stand out from the rest. There are almost no men living here, the first village one comes to on the road leading out of Archer's Post, the nearest town. Women run the show in Umoja, which was founded about a decade ago, and that is very odd in such a patriarchal part of the world.

"We are always under men," said Rebecca Lolosoli, who is the leader of the three dozen or so women who live in Umoja, which means Unity in Swahili. "The men treat us like nothing. You are there to give them children. We're like property, and we're mistreated."

Umoja traces its origins not so much to political protest, however, as to acts of sexual violence against the women, reportedly by British soldiers. After they were raped, some of the women say, they were chased from their homes by their husbands for supposedly bringing dishonor to the community. Other Umoja women split from their husbands for different reasons and found solidarity with others experiencing marital woes.

British military officials are investigating the rape accusations against their soldiers, who have used the area as a military training ground for decades. A lawyer based in London, Martyn Day, is pursuing a lawsuit on behalf of many of the victims.

There is wide agreement that rapes have occurred, although some opportunistic women eyeing a payoff have also taken advantage of the situation and falsely claimed that they were assaulted. Some of those women have come to the area from other parts of Kenya with mixed-race children, the result of liaisons with white foreigners.

But most of the women of Umoja were not outsiders; at least, not until they became rape victims.

Joseph Kukulet, the husband of one of the women in Umoja, still re-

A pocket of feminine power in a patriarchal part of the world.

members the rage that developed inside him when he learned that his wife had been violated. She had been fetching water from the nearby river, she had told him. A white man in an army uniform pounced on her and tore away her dress.

When he heard the account from his sobbing wife, Mr. Kukulet grabbed a knife and prepared to take revenge — against her. She had brought shame on the family, he said. She had exposed him to sexually transmitted diseases. It was only because friends were around to restrain him that she managed to escape with her life.

Mr. Kukulet said he knew that it was the soldier, not his wife, who instigated the act. But that did not matter. "She brought shame to me in the community," he said. "And maybe this soldier was sick. She'll get me sick."

His wife joined Umoja, where she and the other women have gotten on with life. They make the elaborate bead necklaces that are a trademark among Samburu women and sell them to tourists who pass by on their way to Samburu National Reserve.

Since coming together, the women have earned enough to buy new clothes and send their children to school. Many of their husbands used to insist that the children take care of the livestock instead of going to school. Now the women decide.

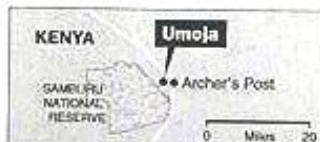
"We've seen so many changes in these women," Ms. Lolosoli said. "They're healthier and happier. They dress well. They used to have to beg. Now, they're the ones giving out food to others."

The transformation has stirred ire among some local men. One husband erupted into fury when asked the other day what he thought about his wife's new life. "Get out of my face," he said sternly, threatening to fight his questioner before storming away.

Because there is no formal divorce



Villagers and tourists performing traditional dances in Umoja. The women earn money by selling the bead necklaces they make.



The New York Times

in Samburu culture, the husbands sometimes barge into Umoja and demand that their wives come home again. The women refuse. If the men grow abusive, the women run to the local authorities.

"Sometimes a man will come in and want to beat his wife," said Ms. Lolosoli, the chief. "He'll see that the woman's earning some money and wearing nice clothes. She'll always

tell him to go away. You should see his face when she says, 'I don't need you anymore.'"

The women do not tell their personal tales to the tourists. If anybody asks why there are virtually no men around, which does not happen often, the women simply say that the men are out taking care of the cows.

Although the women say they are managing just fine without their husbands, they do not completely isolate themselves from men. A few men live in Umoja with their wives, while others are hired for odd jobs, to tend the cattle or put up thorn fencing, activities not traditionally performed by women.

That is not all. These women are still women, and they say they still enjoy the company of men.

"The women here are not saying they don't need men at all," said Beatrice, a local schoolteacher who lives in the village after splitting up with her husband. "The women are human beings and have needs. But the men who come just stay for a short time and then they go. They are boyfriends. That's all."